

# Dark Lullaby: Irene Angelico's belated pilgrimage to Vilnius

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2016 m. gruodžio 14 d. 14:55



Acclaimed Canadian filmmaker Irene Angelico confronts her doubts and visits Vilnius, the city where her parents lived during the [Second World War](#). They knew it as [Vilna](#). aA



Irene Angelico at the Berlin Wall, 1980s - Photo Courtesy DLI Productions

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When [Irene Lilienheim Angelico](#) was invited to Vilnius she wrestled with herself over whether or not to go. A friend had sent her a film about the city's interwar status as a thriving hub of [Jewish](#) culture nestled in the far northeast corner of [Poland](#), rich in art and intellectual inquiry. A linguistic melting pot where savants and theologians came for inspiration, a sanctuary [Napoleon I](#) had coined the "[Jerusalem of the North](#)." The charming Baroque town better known as Vilna or [Wilno](#).

Seeing the grainy archival footage made her feel miserable. Her mind turned automatically to the dark years that followed, the period in which the city's place as a jewel in the crown of eastern European Jewish culture came to a sudden and awful halt. Could she really bring herself to visit a site of such inhumanity?

"There are different levels of looking at this history," she offers pensively as we mosey towards the bagel shop on Pylimo Street, an attractive thoroughfare that runs right through what was once Vilna's Jewish quarter. "Sometimes you look at it at a fairly superficial level, then sometimes you get deeper into what it really means, and feel what it really means."

The burst of curly black hair that frames Angelico's warm expression hints at fun, an afternoon of cheeky repartee perhaps. Her unflagging Canadian-style geniality is indeed infectious. But the celebrated Montréal-based filmmaker is hardly superficial. A whole chapter of her life was devoted to unearthing details of her family's remarkable passage through the ghettos and concentration camps of Europe three quarters of a century ago, a personal quest which led her into the blackest recesses of Second World War history.

So consuming was that quest Angelico felt impelled to make a film. The result was 'Dark Lullabies,' a feature-length documentary about the effect of the Holocaust on the children of survivors and perpetrators, those who grew up in the shadow of tragedy. Premiered in 1985 it has become her most acclaimed work. Screened across Lithuania as part of the recent Nepatogus Kinas festival, the film follows Angelico around the globe as she traces her Jewish roots, searching for answers about what happened during the Holocaust.

The journey begins in her native Canada, where she connects for the first time with fellow "second genners"—the children of survivors—discovering she is not alone in her thirst for information

about what her parents had suffered. This spurs her to visit Israel, the spiritual heart of Judaism and the country where the majority of Holocaust survivors settled eventually. There she finds far greater candour about the tragedy of the War than back home in North America and no shortage of supporters willing to help her get to the bottom what happened to her people.

With wind in her sails she makes a pilgrimage to Europe, where the ghosts of her perished relatives and millions of others still hover. Her parents, originally from Warsaw, had ended up in concentration camps in Germany and she finds the courage to step foot in Dachau, the facility where her father had been interned. She overcomes deep-ingrained anxieties to break bread with her counterparts, the descendants of the perpetrators. What she encounters is a messy weave of guilt, circumspection, silence and denial; a generation struggling to make sense of being the nation that unleashed the most grievous event in history.

Making the film required fortitude. Like many children of survivors, Angelico was “emotionally crippled” by her family history for years. Her mother kept the trauma “in an iron box at the pit of her stomach” and discussion of the War was strictly forbidden at home. Once she was old enough to have questions there were no uncles, aunts or cousins to divulge the details—none had survived. There wasn't even a family photo album, only a couple of fragments.

A feeling of emptiness welled until, in her thirties, Angelico worked up the courage to confront it. “Going through it, making the film and coming out the other end was cathartic,” she says. But the pain never dissipated completely. “Every once in a while I can't help going down deep into all those feelings again,” she admits. The thought of walking the same cobbled laneways her parents did in Vilna ghetto seventy-five years ago filled Angelico with trepidation. “Seeing the film my friend sent me, thinking about all those people who were forsaken by their neighbours, coming to Vilnius was like, what the hell am I doing this for?”

After fleeing Warsaw, Angelico's parents spent three years in Vilnius before being transferred to camps in Germany. That part of their story is not recounted in 'Dark Lullabies.' The film was made in the mid-1980s when Lithuania was still part of the Soviet Union; it was impossible for a Western filmmaker to go there and kick up dust about a sensitive historical issue. However, in the Israel chapter of the film Angelico does interview a man of Lithuanian Jewish origin who had endured the cruelty of Vilna ghetto. He is attending an international forum for Holocaust survivors at which long-lost relatives and friends try to find each other. When Angelico introduces herself as the daughter of people who had lived in the same ghetto, the man begins to weep. Asked why, he answers that he always breaks down at the thought of the tens of thousands of Jews taken from the ghetto to the nearby forest at Paneriai, also known as Ponar, to be killed.

It was the kind of exchange that haunted Angelico at the time of making the film and made her ask whether she was “betraying” the Jewish community by going to what was then West Germany and

engaging in discourse with the descendants of Holocaust perpetrators. In the mid-1980s it was standard for Jewish people to refuse to have anything to do with Germany or German culture, Angelico says. “You wouldn't buy a Volkswagen, you wouldn't listen to Wagner, you'd certainly never dream of visiting the country. So I was constantly questioning myself. But I felt like I really needed to do it, I felt like it was the only way to get answers.” It was much the same when she was contemplating her invitation to Vilnius this year: the importance of retracing her parents' story eventually outweighed any apprehensions.

We saunter through the quietly elegant streets of the Lithuanian capital's New Town. Trolleybuses rumble past, interrupting the flow of conversation more than once. Upon arriving at Pylimo Street, I explain that the street's name changed no less than eight times during the twentieth century, reflecting the city's turbulent history. This is no surprise to Angelico. When her parents had come to Vilnius they regarded it as Polish city.

As she recounts, their wedding was arranged hastily for a frigid November evening with only immediate family and a rabbi in attendance. The ceremony had to take place by candlelight because of a nine o'clock curfew imposed on Jews by German authorities. It was Warsaw, 1939. Germany had occupied the city two months earlier when Poland was forcibly partitioned, marking the beginning of the Second World War. The atmosphere was tense. Reliable information was scarce. Confusion reigned. In twelve months' time the notorious Warsaw ghetto would be established and within four years most of its inhabitants would be dead, having been shipped in cattle cars to Treblinka.

In comparison, Wilno, also known in Jewish culture as Vilna, five hundred kilometres to the northeast, seemed a haven. In dividing up Poland, Berlin and Moscow had agreed the Jerusalem of the North should fall on the Soviet-controlled side of the partition. The new border that divided Poland remained open until November 1939, and to escape the spectre of fascism, Jews from all over the German-occupied half of Poland began making their way to the Soviet side. Instinctively, the newlyweds knew they ought to do the same. They bid their farewells and, accompanied by the groom's twin sister and her young family, fled.

A frightening road journey ensued. The party was arrested by the Red Army for harbouring bourgeois motives—they had cobbled together a package of family treasures—but were released shortly after thanks to the temerity of Angelico's mother, who pretended to be pregnant by padding her belly with laundry. They did make their destination, Vilnius, and the city did prove to be a refuge, for a time.

Under the terms of the [Molotov-Ribbentrop pact](#), the border between Lithuania and Poland had moved, reestablishing Vilnius as a Lithuanian city, although the transfer of power was chaotic. For the first six months of 1940 the city came under the control of Lithuanian authorities, which, under

pressure from Moscow, allowed Jewish life to go on tentatively while the local government conducted a rigorous program of anti-Polonisation. Three Yiddish newspapers continued to be published daily. The city's many synagogues were in constant use. More than twelve thousand Jewish refugees flocked there.

The atmosphere grew ominous once the Soviet Union seized the city in June 1940, imposing Stalinist ideology. All political parties and movements, apart from the Communist Party, were declared illegal and elements deemed bourgeois were exiled to Siberia. Jewish organisations were prohibited. Hebrew schools were shut. With the permission of Soviet authorities, some four thousand Zionist activists departed Vilna for Eretz Israel. Others in the Jewish community left Lithuania to settle in the bosom of the Soviet Union. Angelico's family, ordinary people without political affiliations, did their best to ignore the swelling turmoil, keeping their heads down.

Then, on 22 June 1941, in one of the grand moments of twentieth-century history, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Tiny Lithuania fell immediately and would remain in German hands for two barbarous years. [Anti-semitism](#) had been fomenting in pockets of the Lithuanian populace for generations. In late 1939, it began to boil over. Before Angelico's parents arrived, several pogroms had taken place in Vilnius amidst the rampant de-Polonisation of the city. Soviet authorities had intervened but now the Nazi occupiers fanned those hateful flames vigorously. Their doctrine of racial purity found a natural partner in the ethnic cleansing agenda pushed by certain Lithuanian nationalists.

Within weeks the German occupiers were implementing a strategy to [exterminate](#) Lithuanian Jews. In Vilnius, two ghettos were established. By the end of the same year one had already been liquidated, its residents mostly shot into pits at [Paneriai](#), the same ones that brought the survivor in 'Dark Lullabies' to tears. The other, where Jews fit for work lived, was decimated little by little until finally, in 1943, it was liquidated. The remaining residents were deported to concentration camps in occupied Latvia and Estonia, or death camps in occupied Poland.

The Jewish population of Vilnius on the eve of the Holocaust is estimated to have been approximately sixty thousand, including refugees. By the beginning of 1942, only fifteen thousand remained. More than one hundred thousand people perished at Paneriai over the course of the German occupation, including seventy thousand Jews, a considerable number of whom had been brought from places other than ghetto. While it is generally accepted that the mass extermination program was contrived by the Germans occupiers, it is a matter of record that Lithuanian nationalists participated in the killings at Paneriai and other massacre sites around the country as executioners.

Throughout that violent second half of 1941 so-called selections were a regular occurrence in the ghetto. Authorities either issued adult inmates with a work permit, which allowed them and their



families to continue to live in the ghetto, or did not, which meant they would be sent to Paneriai. Being young and sturdy, Angelico's parents were selected for work. They were assigned to a hospital in the suburbs Vilnius as janitors. Every morning a truck would pick them up, deliver them to the hospital, and after a back-breaking day they would be collected and returned to the ghetto.

One evening as workers were clambering out of the wagon into the narrow cobbled streets of the Old Town the driver's foot slipped off the brake, causing the truck to roll straight into where Angelico's father was standing. There was no time to jump out of the way. The truck rammed into his leg, tearing the flesh and crushing the bone. Rushing to the scene, two Jewish medicos, themselves inmates in the ghetto, did their best to dress the wound with what rudimentary equipment they had. They carried the man back to his quarters, propped him upon his threadbare mattress and there he languished for weeks.

Meanwhile, a new acquaintance of the couple's, a jeweller from Poland called Pfefferberg, had hatched a plan for a small group of friends to escape the heavily policed confines of the ghetto to join anti-German partisans in a forest hideout. The idea was to bribe the guards with watches and necklaces Pfefferberg had stashed from his workshop. Determined not to miss the opportunity, the sick man's wife tore off her yellow star, marched into the Lithuanian part of the town, tracked down a gentile doctor she knew from the hospital and convinced him to follow her back to the ghetto to set her husband's leg anew. "Remarkably, he did—an incredible act of courage on both their parts," says Angelico, still in awe of her mother's chutzpah.

Alas, the injury needed weeks to heal before he could walk. Pfefferberg couldn't wait that long. The time had come. The rest of the group made their escape while for Angelico's parents life went gloomily on. A broken leg had dashed their hopes. Over the next fortnight her mother kept slogging it out at the hospital while her father let his days pass at home in a state of misery. Then through ghetto backchannels the news came. They were all dead. The officials Pfefferberg had bribed informed on them. They'd all been sent to Paneriai. Angelico pauses. "Isn't it extraordinary, the different strokes of luck, or destiny, that actually saved them from dying at that moment in the War?"

Not everyone in the family was so fortunate. When the selectors came to Angelico's aunt and her little clan, who had fled Warsaw alongside the newlyweds, the verdict was as swift as it was brutal. They were deemed unfit to work, or, as Angelico puts it, they were "pulled from the line for life into the line for death." Nothing could be done. Like tens of thousands of others they were taken to Paneriai and shot, even the child. Angelico pauses again. "My father never got over not being able to do something about that."

In 1942 Germany's efforts against the Soviet Union began to falter. The German war economy needed to be stimulated. Forced labour would be essential, and that meant the fifteen thousand

Jews left in Vilnius were allowed to live. The ghetto became more stable—workshops and factories were set up, an organised resistance formed, even cultural activities such as Yiddish choirs and theatre began to appear. Angelico's father's leg did heal and the couple carried out their servitude at the hospital until mid-1943 when Heinrich Himmler, the commander of the SS and arguably the engineer of the Holocaust, ordered all ghettos in Ostland be liquidated. Husband and wife were separated, shipped from one concentration camp to another in Latvia, Estonia and finally to Germany. Angelico's mother suffered the last years of the War as a forced labourer in the camp at Magdeburg. Her father was deported to Dachau.

As our leisurely stroll through modern Vilnius reaches its end the scenography changes. Splendid promenades become meandering laneways. Soviet and Polish edifices are replaced by cute Italianate shopfronts. We arrive at the bagel shop, which is overflowing with customers. It is lunchtime peak. The two ladies behind the counter are struggling to keep up with orders, most of which are for brown rolls with smoked salmon. We can barely hear each other.

Angelico describes her childhood as “amazingly suburban.” After the War Angelico's parents left Europe forever to begin life anew in Canada. Like so many survivors they were reluctant ever to speak about what had happened, in part to shield their children from the trauma. “In my family it was my mother who decided that she didn't want this horror to be passed on to the next generation, and even though my father would have spoken about it, I wasn't going to be told. And so I just hid my head in the sand and didn't deal with this history for years.”

She was not living in a vacuum, however. “All the children of survivors knew something had happened, nobody could hide it completely. You know, you hear things late at night, you start talking to your friends, you pick things up through the years.” The turning point came in 1977 when Angelico was reading the New York Times. An article entitled 'The Heirs of the Holocaust' caught her eye. The author, American journalist Helen Epstein, had spoken with dozens of second generations about their upbringing and noticed patterns. Subjects told her of the isolation they felt growing up in a dome of silence, having no extended family, seeing no photos or artefacts from their parents' youth. Many described feeling disconnected from other North Americans of their generation, separate even from the sizeable Jewish community that existed on the continent prior to the War. Some spoke of a paranoia they could be kidnapped at any moment or encounter violence. Others expressed a need to relate to their parents' suffering by making their own sacrifices, from skimping on food to putting themselves in harm's way, for example, by joining border kibbutzim in Israel. A psychiatrist Epstein interviewed concluded that the trauma of survivors was, at some level, being transmitted from one generation to the next.

Angelico was dumbfounded by what she read. Thousands had experienced a childhood like hers. Two years later, having been flooded with correspondence from around the world, Epstein expanded her New York Times piece into the tome 'Children of the Holocaust.' Angelico was “first

in line” to read what became her “tattered, highlighted Bible,” guiding her into the complex emotional terrain her peers were navigating. Epstein had, above all, brought to light the special affinity second generations felt for each other, regardless of social background or political disposition, and the shared longing for answers about their family history. For Angelico, that was empowering.

Angelico was also struck by the many tales of pilgrimages, “kids” her age making the trek to eastern Europe to see for themselves the shtetls, cities and concentration camps in which their parents had once dwelled. She began to picture herself doing the same thing, which triggered deeper questions. Was it mere luck that saved her parents? Would she have survived in their place? If she had been born German, or Lithuanian for that matter, how would she have behaved during the War?

The genie was out of the bottle but nothing could happen yet. Angelico was busy establishing herself as a film producer. She had just landed a sought-after staff position with the National Film Board of Canada in Montréal where she was required to work on documentaries covering a wide range of issues in society. Before long the Second World War came up yet it was still something of a no-go zone. “My whole life it had been no Holocaust films, no books about the Holocaust, no nothing, period. That was my rule and I wasn't going to break it.”

That rule had to be done away with when her boss, a “legendary” figure one would never dare defy, instructed his staff to watch Marcel Ophüls' 'The Memory of Justice,' about the Nuremberg trials. Resistant at first, Angelico gave in. To her surprise, she was not upset by what she saw. She found herself entranced by Hitler's chief architect, Albert Speer, the man responsible for the monumental structure in Nuremberg where the infamously propagandistic Nazi party rallies were staged. “Have you ever seen him?” Angelico asks, suddenly buoyant. “He's such a gentlemen, soft-spoken, almost sweet. He comes across like a professor, a likeable presence even. I felt like I could have been sitting there talking to him and actually enjoying his company.” From that moment the Nazis were no longer cardboard villains. They were real people as relatable and complicated as anyone else. “That freaked me out, and that's what changed everything.”

Transfixed with curiosity, she went home from the screening and mustered the strength to do something she never had. On her bookshelf stood a dust-covered manuscript. It was her father's. Decades earlier, when Angelico was only a baby, he had written down a plain, factual account of his wartime experiences. Her mother hid the book away, unveiling it only once her daughter had come of age. Although Angelico had had the harrowing document in her possession for a decade, she nonetheless avoided it until that night when she picked it up and “just read it, and read it, and read it until I was finished.”

With her career as a filmmaker taking off, it was only natural Angelico would want to explore the questions brewing in her mind through a screen project. Angelico's then boyfriend, Abbey Neidik, a



cinematographer, had an idea. Why not make a film about Irene Angelico and her life as the child of Holocaust survivors? In the early 1980s, the “personal journey” documentary genre, in which an on-screen protagonist investigates some topic of personal import, was almost unheard-of. “In my mind, a documentary was supposed to be objective. I would never have put myself in it,” Angelico says.

Neidik went further, urging her to include references to her family liberally—not just the details of their story but quotations from her father's manuscript and the scant remaining photographs. “I even remember fighting with Abbey, yelling and screaming in the basement of the Film Board, but he kept pushing me to do it. You have to remember how raw all this was. This history was something I still couldn't talk to my parents about.”

Eventually Angelico's future husband and professional partner persuaded her. 'Dark Lullabies' became an instant success, noted for its innovative use of one family's story as a locus for a grand historical narrative. It won six top international film awards including first prize at the International Film Festival in Mannheim, Germany, and Most Memorable Film at The World Television Festival in Tokyo. Now considered a classic, the National Film Board of Canada named it one of the fifty greatest documentaries ever made. Many personal journey documentaries by children of survivors would emulate Angelico's approach, something that has made its originator proud. “I never expected the impact it would have. If I've helped anyone get closer to the history of their people and their family, then I've achieved more than I set out to.”

The queue at the bagel shop has vanished. The two ladies have disappeared behind a plastic barrier to wash dirty plates. Peak hour appears to be over. It is quiet at last. I take advantage of a lull in the conversation to tell Angelico about the shop. It opened late last year as a tolerance project initiated by the Lithuanian Jewish Community. The idea was that non-Jewish volunteers would operate a little stall for special events in the Jewish calendar. After a few months of start-stop operation the demand for the delicious boiled rolls became so strong the outfit mutated into a full-time business. A small but promising success story for Jewish affairs in Lithuania, I venture.

And not the only sign a taboo is being lifted, Angelico replies. The festival that screened 'Dark Lullabies' across Lithuania last month took the controversial decision to make the Holocaust a core theme of its program. A variety of hard-hitting films were screened alongside Angelico's, from one of the very first Holocaust documentaries—the half-hour 'Night and Fog' from 1955 by Alain Resnais—to Claude Lanzmann's gigantic 'Shoah,' made in the 1980s and considered by many to be the apotheosis of the genre.

Festival director Gediminas Andriukaitis writes in his program welcome message that “in Lithuania we are feeling the awakening of the society, the willingness of the younger generation to embrace the Holocaust tragedy with open hearts, leaving half-truths behind once and for all. The festival is

joining this movement with a special retrospective on Holocaust in film, hoping that it will contribute to this painful, but very important reflection.”

A “national soul-searching” is definitely happening, Angelico insists. “There was a young woman who stood up at the end of the screening [of 'Dark Lullabies'] the first night of the festival and said: 'we did learn about the Holocaust in school, but we always thought of it as something that happened to other people, the Jews. We never thought of it as our history, Lithuanian history. But in this year, we're starting to understand that these were our citizens, these were our people, this happened to us.'” She reflects a moment. “It was worth coming here to hear that.”

Angelico predicts the healing process will be hard. There will be resistance. Emotions shall run high. But the country must persevere, she says. Giving voice to survivors, perpetrators and bystanders, through film, for instance, is a necessary step, as is dialogue between their descendants. “Not dealing with it is not going to make it go away. In a way it's worse. It's good to explore and find the answers that come. Even if you're a young person and you're worried that your father or grandfather was a Lithuanian collaborator or the vice commandant of Auschwitz or whatever, it's better to know and to deal with it than to have it buried there. It's a dark place that you might have to go through, but it's essential.”

**D<sup>+</sup>** | Populiariausi straipsniai ir video

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